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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the benefits of such networking projects as the Northern Rockies Consortium for Higher Education, which was founded as a non-profit corporation four years ago to encourage faculty development and instructional development in the four state region of Idaho, Montana, Utah and Wyoming, and describes the development of this consortium. Four major lessons learned during that time are summarized as strategies: (1) the operation should be diversified to provide a wide variety of services and possibilities to the members of the association; (2) the benefits should be spread to make sure each school receives a fair share of the resources of the operation; (3) insure that each member has a mutual investment; and (4) respect the existing organization structure by working within the traditional department and college systems. Four reference sources are listed. (CHC)

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STARTING A REGIONAL CONSORTIUM IN INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS AFTER FOUR YEARS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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STARTING A REGIONAL CONSORTIUM IN INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

LESSONS AFTER FOUR YEARS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

As higher education enters the decade of the 80's, the important watchword will be interdependence. While in the past, lip service has been given to cooperative modes of operating, the traditional autonomy of the universities and a sense of self sufficient isolation has more often been the norm. In the coming decade, however, with limited resources and mounting expectations by consumer groups, the idea of consciously building networks to share information and services and thereby promote efficiency will have increasing appeal at all levels of society, but particularly in high education. Indicative of that trend has been the growth in numbers of consortia throughout the past decade.

While, in the words of Louis Patterson (1979) "there is no signle model for college cooperation", there are some overriding principles in forming cooperative networks which need to be maintained. These are principles derived from the experience of the author as well as the literature surveyed. They provide a general strategy for beginning a program of cooperative work. Throughout this article reference will be made to experience in the western United States with the Northern Rockies Consortium for Higher Education. At this point, there is no final word since the organization continues to evolve. We now have four years experience trying to link services and personnel of more than one institution to focus on major problems needing resolution. We attempt, in the long run, to increase efficiency of the operating unit or sub-units, in this case the colleges and universities making up our organization.

The Benefits of Networking

At an early meeting of the founders of The Northern Rockies Consortium for Higher Education, it was discovered that three of the four centers represented had undertaken projects involving the redesign of the freshman level introductory biology course. Two of these centers had used an audio tape format and self instructional mode; the third had used the audio tape, and in addition, a video tape approach. In each case the effort was handled independently of the other centers, with no knowledge that the other centers were embarking on this course. These were schools located within an eighty mile radius of each other. The point was not that one institution should have done the project and the other two merely implemented or adapted the results of that project, but rather that they could have learned from each others experience and possibly saved a considerable amount of time and misdirected energy benefiting from the experiences of other people. That instance underscores the need for close working relationships among similar types of organizations in the field of instructional improvement.

Berquist and Lindquist (1979) have pointed out the communication linkages which are necessary for effective networking to take place. They view networking as basically a structured communication process in which multiple sources of information are available and where multiple messages from multiple sources are received. It is assumed that the adoption of any innovation will require a variety of sources of information and multiple examples--some of which can be planned; some of which result spontaneously--to provide details of how the innovation can best be put into practice.

It is hard to argue against communciation. That concept has gained considerable popularity over the years. However, it is possible to feel that information overload has taken place and that further communication will be detrimental to accomplishing the purposes of an organization. It is anticipated that through networking, a series of favorable encounters can be structured into the system and that the benefits of the right amount of information realized. In the sections which follow in this report, various principles for successful networking are examined and in turn, ways of using these strategies are typified. While our experience certainly is not unique, it is experience that could benefit others attempting to set up similar kinds of resource networks. Four major areas or elements of strategy are outlined as follows:

1. Diversify the Operation
2. Spread the Benefits
3. Insure that Investment is Mutual
4. Respect the Existing Organizational Structure

At this point an insertion giving background on NORCHE is needed. Following that initial background, an examination of these four principles will be undertaken.

The Northern Rockies Consortium for Higher Education

Until relatively recently, few of the institutions of higher education in the four state region of Utah, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming had experienced much impact from the parallel movements of instructional development and faculty development. Institutions in this region share

similar problems stemming from the rural, isolated nature of many of the schools and the scant population and resource base. With a combined population of 2.8 million (1970 census) and a population density of 6.8 persons per square mile, these states represent virtually the most sparsely populated areas in the United States, excepting Nevada and Alaska.

In early 1978, representatives from four institutions--Boise State University, Idaho State University, Utah State University and Weber State College (Utah)--formally organized The Northern Rockies Consortium for Higher Education (NORCHE). Concurrently they applied for and received funding for a three year grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education.

During the first year, fifteen institutions were members of NORCHE. That number has increased to twenty-two during the second and third years. The mix of schools includes universities and four year colleges as well as community colleges and technical schools. Two private schools supported by different religious denominations are included as members.

Since its inception, NORCHE has employed a small professional staff drawn mainly from consultants to involve member schools in a widening scope of instructional improvement activities. Four resource schools provided technical assistance to designated pilot schools. Each institution has been asked to commit the half-time services of one faculty member to coordinate instructional improvement activities on their own campus. Following training in a consortium workshop, this Institutional Representative has worked with a faculty committee to

develop a specific plan of activities for their particular school. Consortium resources have then been matched with those desired in the plan.

Activities sponsored by NORCHE include the conducting of faculty workshops, exchange of consultant expertise, intensive course development, and the visits of faculty to other consortium projects. All activities are directed toward the four established consortium goals: instructional development, faculty development, institutional development and inter-institutional exchange.

The consortium aims ultimately at the improvement of the quality of instruction at participating schools, the development of a regional resources directory and an increased level of interinstitutional exchange throughout the four state region. While the approach taken by the consortium contains little which has not been attempted by other consortia elsewhere, what is unique is the application of this startegy in a region of widely dispersed and relatively isolated sites.

Principle No. 1. Diversify the Operation

It is important that a wide variety of services and possibilities be available to members of the association. A narrowly focused program, as Lindquist and Bergquist (1979) have pointed out, can often best be accomplished through an existing organization. However, when an existing organization is not sufficient and when the goals are sufficiently large a more effective strategy is often that of building

a resource network. NORCHE, for example, is focused upon effective teaching and learning, certainly a broad aim. The means employed to reach these ends are very diverse. The use of specific consultants assigned as resource people to the member institutions, the promoting of exchange services and people, and the development of a computerized listing of resources represent some of the programs undertaken by the Consortium. Workshops and meetings of the Consortium have multiple purposes and service multiple audiences: from faculty members with interest in teaching improvement to the administrator overseeing such activity to the professional instructional developee assigned to that task. What is important is that enough diversity and enough mix of types of people exists that the uncommon ideas can be generated and the members can select the best from among a number of alternatives.

There are times, however, when the notion of that diversity becomes unmanageable. In the experience of NORCHE, at those points it is advantageous to return to the needs of the member institutions as the basis for any planning or programming. For example, at the Fall workshop held one year after the receipt of funding for the Consortium from the U. S. government a program of workshops conducted by state was advocated. In practice, it turned out that the needs of the supposed audience were too great for that particular mechanism to be effective and that instead, a program of individual workshops for different campuses was a more effective direction to proceed. There seemed to be much more appeal in the idea of each institution coming up with its own plan based on its own needs and then designing a workshop to help implement that plan, drawing upon the resources of the

consortium. Less this lead to fragmentation, it should be noted that workshops involving variety in allowing for latitude in choice have been successful and have been successfully conducted, the most recent being that in Billings Montana in April 1980.

Principle No. 2. Spread the Benefits

The quickest way to kill interinstitutional cooperation is to see all the benefits going to one particular school or cluster of schools while others are left out of these benefits. The association quickly becomes politicized and opinions are polarized. If direct and open confrontation does not result, a growing apathy among many of of the members of the consortium will effectively kill any cooperative efforts. In this case it is important to make sure that each member draws benefits from this association and that to some extent these benefits are related to the effort and investment made by the participating institution.

As a case in point, in the formation of The Northern Rockies Consortium, it was apparent that one school was working hard to obtain the lions share of benefits including the directorship, the responsibility for the proposal-writing, and the administration of funds for the fledgling association. A major confrontation occurred when it was decided by the other participants that this school ought not to bring more representatives to the meetings than the other schools were sending. The confrontation ended with some feelings being hurt, but with the message from other schools that "We will not be railroaded into this thing." As the project developed it became necessary to limit the input exerted by this one school with the aim of strengthening and diversifying the benefits that were going to all of the schools. The

eventual resolution of this conflict--done in a series of retreats in locations remote from the campuses, i.e., ski lodges during off-season --led to a strong esprit de corps among members.

When funding was eventually obtained from the federal government it came at about half the level initially proposed. Instead of being able to hire a full time director, funding would allow for the release time for only part-time for one of the directors. To diversify the benefits and to spread the work load, consultant expertise from each of the various participating schools was obtained on a contractual basis, and major responsibilities have been farmed out through this consultant network. For example, one of the participating schools took over the directorate and management of funds, another the production of the resources directory and the computer based information retrivial system, another the production of the newsletter and the design of workshop in-service packages. This kind of diversifying left all resource schools feeling that they had gotten at least a "piece of the action."

A major challenge beyond the Consortium's first year has been to spread benefits and responsibility to new schools which joined and to recognize talent as it emerged. The successful conference held in the spring of the second year was an instance of where a new member school with initiative has assumed a major leadership role. In the upcoming series of conferences, it appears that a similar pattern of spreading benefits may emerge.

It is important that benefits for both the institution and the individuals be closely examined and taken care of in this process. The

rewards in higher education are numerous. It has been proven to this author in numerous instances that unless the existing reward structure is tapped into directly, the chances of success are minimal.

Principle No. 3: Insure that Investment is Mutual

It might not seem that excessive investment on the part of any one member would be detrimental to the resource network. In fact that condition can be a major danger as one institution begins to assume prominence and thereby to dominate the affairs of all the others. This occurred early in the formation of NORCHE when one school volunteered first to send out a questionnaire assessing needs and second, to coordinate the development of the proposal and third, to direct the consortium. It seemed to those outside of this school that the volunteering and the acceptance of each of these tasks was a lever for building a power base to control the Consortium at the expense of the interests of the other schools. Investment must be mutual.

On the other hand, where little investment takes place it will not work for long to have benefits given across the board. In some instances this problem will take care of itself. For example in compiling the computerized resource directory begun by the consortium, certain schools did not submit entries. In this case, it is hard for other schools to draw upon anything from those schools. Where there is no investment in providing information, no one can use those people nor can benefits accrue. However, in the allocation of funds an effort must be taken to reward those which show initiative and show an

interest in making things happen. In the case where there are funds provided for travel and for consultant help, rather than have these spread equally across the board, it is desireable to use them where they can achieve the most good. Determining this balance has been a major challenge in operating the consortium.

Principle No. 4: Respect the Existing Organizational Structure

At the higher education level formal heirarchies are firmly entrenched. Ample evidence exists that working to circumvent those existing organizations in the long run can be detrimental. For example, in setting up NORCHE it was deemed necessary to work through the academic vice president or provost at each of the participating institutions, if only to identify the appropriate person to serve as a representative to the consortium.

Conclusions

The development of a resource network can take many forms. In its simplist form, it may be a group of individuals working toward a common goal. It may take the form of a professional association, however loosely defined, which brings people together periodically and which fosters correspondence and telephone exchange throughout the times between meetings. Or, moving toward increasing structure, the resource network may take the form of a consortium or other institution.

The Northern Rockies Consortium for Higher Education began as a rather informal structure which has moved toward more formality and

institutionalization with outside funding assistance. A major purpose of NORCHE is to bring together professionals with common interests and to stimulate the exchange of ideas. The vehicles used to accomplish this task range from conferences and workshops, newsletters and most recently a computerized data base listing projects which can be shared throughout the network.

The four principles determined for networking are as follows:

1. Diversify the Operation
2. Spread the Benefits
3. Insure that Investment is Mutual
4. Respect the Existing Organizational Structure

To those beginning or contemplating the beginning of such a resource network, these points may seem reasonably self-evident. However, from those with the actual experience of having carried out such a project, the difficulty of balancing these principles against one another, of maintaining the balance of motivation and interest of participants and of working with people with the required amount of finesse will seem formidable, which it is.

The benefits which can potentially be derived from this type of association have been listed and documented elsewhere. It is sufficient to say here that these are considerable. The aim of this article has not been to provide advice but rather to share a set of guidelines which the interested professional with a commitment to the networking of ideas can apply. It is my sincere hope that in future

years that the number of such organizations where meaningful ties and more productive ideas can be established will multiply. The building of commonalities is a major accomplishment, the spirit of which is summarized well by St. Augustine:

> In essentials, unity
> In non-essentials, liberty,
> And in all things, charity.
>
> (Cherry, 1978).

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